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ABSTRACT

The Research and Planning Division at Ontario Educational Communications Authority undertakes formative, summative, background, and policy research to provide better educational services to audiences via electronic and associated media. Research activities are carried out by three groups. Planning and Development formulates long term plans, assesses adult educational needs, and provides accessibility to 7,500 programs through a computerized system. Audience Research studies program utilization and alternative solutions. Project Research provides direct and immediate feedback to program producers by formative and summative evaluation to enhance program quality. (SC)

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Decision-Oriented Research in an Educational Communications Organization

A paper for the NAEB Convention, Chicago, October 25, 1976

by Lewis Miller

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When faced with beginning this paper, I was reminded of that well-worn anecdote concerning a classroom warning to would-be plagiarists: if you take from one source and don't give credit, it's plagiarism; if you take from three, it's scholarship; but if you take from five, that's research. Applying that anecdote to my activities, the borrowing and stealing of good research ideas is a good beginning for my job description. But I'll give some credits.

To place in context what I have to say about our research activities I have to tell you a little about our organization. To begin with, credit for the very place of research within the Ontario Educational Communications Authority (I'll say OECA from here on) has to be given to the wise framers of the provincial act that led to our formation six and a half years ago. We are, what we term in Canada, a provincial crown corporation, and while funded through provincial grants, we are an autonomous agency, with our own Board of Directors. Our mandate is to provide educational opportunities to all citizens of Ontario by means of electronic and associated media. While this mandate is broad, in practice we have to concentrate our resources primarily on broadcast distribution, with videotape distribution to educational institutions as our secondary thrust. From our broadcast beginnings six years ago with one station in Toronto we now operate a six station network which covers a land mass containing 73% of Ontario's population. We have a full-time complement of 400, with some dozens of freelance and contract staff. We're on air from 8 a.m. to almost midnight seven days per week, with reduced summer hours. Ontario, geographically, is a large province---Texas would fit into about 65% of Ontario's land mass. But about 75% of its population of 8 million live along our southern boundary, along the northern shores of Lakes Ontario and Erie, with a seemingly illogical

clustering in the area of Ottawa, our federal capitol. Actually there was a logic to the siting of Ottawa. It's about 90 miles or so up the Ottawa River, far enough away from the U.S. border to keep our federal legislators out of range of American cannon. They're still out of range; although nowadays I suspect they're more worried about Canadian cannon.

To return to the place of research within this context, OECA's founding bill has three objects: the first, naturally, is to produce, acquire and distribute programming; the second, is to undertake research in support of the first object; and the third, to do whatever is needed in support of the first two. To stress this point, research within OECA is a statutory condition of our very existence.

The place of research is reinforced administratively in that the position of Head of the Research and Planning Division is at a peer level with the other five heads of divisions who report directly to the Executive Director. And, pertinent to the theme of our symposium today, the head of research has an equal voice with each other member of the Executive Committee in the framing and supervising of policy and in the making of major administrative decisions.

While the statutory position of research has been recognized from our birth, the senior administrative positioning and the breadth of our activities have had a somewhat younger life. About three years ago, when we were doing some changing of hats, and when it had become more fully appreciated that we needed stronger research support, I was afforded the opportunity to take on the position of head of the Research and Planning Division, with the responsibility to re-shape it as I saw fit. This was welcome, I might say, in at least two respects. First, I had been our charter head of programming, and, after those first three hectic and trying years with my head over the parapet, my old hat looked more like a sieve. Secondly, I've long held the

firm belief that researchers should and could work more closely with producers--- so, what better way to test a belief? This conviction or prejudice goes back almost twenty years, by the way, to when I was a program organizer for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, when I discovered for the first time, to my sorrow, that research in broadcasting tended to be equated only with head-counting. Now that's a hard prejudice to counter.

Fortunately I had already begun to find strong support for my own convictions. What better argument could one find than the success of "Sesame Street", with the essential function of formative research in its development. We had become familiar with this series from its start in 1969 and from our broadcast beginnings in 1970 we bought rights for re-runs of the series. CTW has been generous in their published reports as well as in sending their missionaries out throughout the land. For example, when Ed Palmer spoke at a conference in Toronto about five years ago, I was a most attentive listener. I was even more attentive--wearing my new research hat--when Ed addressed the NAEB convention in New Orleans three years ago. There was no question in my mind that formative research was going to be an essential function for OECA. Thanks, Ed.

But while formative research would bring researchers closer to programmers, we had other preoccupations as well. OECA has been a pioneer in educational broadcasting in Canada. We were all alone at first (now Alberta and Quebec have joined us). We did have access to the services of commercial survey companies, but these were not helpful in our aims to assess special audiences, such as in-school audiences. Besides we didn't want to get trapped in the ratings game. That wouldn't have been meaningful, in any case, to our aim to serve audiences, not a mass audience. I therefore searched for a model that would serve all of our needs; and we found one.

By good fortune I was a member of the first advisory committee formed by the Agency for Instructional Television; and an agenda item for a meeting in the fall of 1973 was a commissioned paper by Professor Keith Mielke, entitled "Decision-Oriented Research in School Television" (later published in the June, 1974 issue of Public Telecommunications Review). I promptly placed it on the agenda of a forthcoming session planned for the purpose of moulding our Research and Planning Division. In brief, this paper has been a significant formative paper in the development of our research structure.

At this point I'm reminded of an anecdote about the man who, when asked why he spent so much time at the home of a particular friend, said, Why, he's borrowed so many of my books that dropping in on him is one of the best ways I know to become acquainted with my own library.--Keith, you're most welcome to drop in on us at any time if you wish to see what's been happening to some of your ideas.

Before giving you a sketch of our activities I know you will want to hear something about the budget and complement with which we operate. As I mentioned previously, the OECA has a complement of 400. Our operating budget is somewhat more than \$18½ million. The programming division, the core of our activity, has a complement of 155, with a budget of about \$11 million. The Research and Planning Division has a complement of 21 full-time staff members (currently, also, we have 10 researchers on freelance project contracts), and we have a budget of \$675,000. In addition, we will receive this year about \$10,000 in supplementary grants for specially funded projects, thus our effective operating budget this fiscal year will be about \$685,000. Our budget thus comes to somewhat more than 3.6% of the total OECA operating budget, and slightly more than 6% of the total budget spent on programming.

In shaping our research organization we took as guidelines the four categories of evaluation activities outlined in the Mielke paper: (1) back-

ground research; (2) formative research; (3) summative research; and (4) policy research. With these guidelines we framed task descriptions that could be handled by three sections of our Research and Planning Division. These sections have been labelled as follows: Planning and Development; Audience Research; and Project Research.

Perhaps the best way to describe the work of Research and Planning is for me to tell you about a few samples of activity undertaken by each of our three sections.

First, our Planning and Development section is the part of us most concerned with helping to identify needs and interests. The "planning" label in this title is concerned primarily with long-term planning. To help in doing this we have established a Planning Committee, composed of about a dozen non-OECA people, plus two members of our Board and two staff members, each of whom is a leader in her or his own right. This group serves as a kind of "brains-trust" advisory committee to our Board of Directors, and their mandate is focussed on trends in our society that may affect or alter our educational objectives. I serve as Secretary to this Planning Committee, and the Planning and Development section is its secretariat. But this is only a modest part of what this section does. During the past year, for example, we published a book, Demand for Part-Time Learning in Ontario, written by the Director of Planning and Development, Ignacy Waniewicz, who designed the survey and supervised its direction. This work tells us a great deal about learners, part-time learners, and would-be learners; who they are; their interests, needs, and motivations, what they are actually studying, what they are willing to spend in dollars and time, what are the impediments to study, etc. This work is now a valuable source book for our planners of programs for adults. Another major undertaking of Planning and Development is our ongoing Access/Index Project. We have now more than 7,500 program titles in our inventory, and

the indexing of these titles, as well as the providing for accessibility to them, are major problems. We thus decided to establish a computerized system for this purpose. Within a month or two we will have put into the computer 3,500 titles, permitting access to them through the program title, or series title, or through a key-word system.---Among the eleven other projects this section has been involved in this year was an ascertainment survey which we voluntarily undertook, on problems, interests, and needs related to education among the adult population of the Toronto area. While our modest core staff of this section write and supervise the designs of their projects, most of the survey work is commissioned out to non-OECA agencies or undertaken by freelance researchers on project contracts. This follows our practice that research in which we might have vested interests should be undertaken by non-OECA agencies or individuals.

The second section I'll consider, Audience Research, headed by Larry Gerner, would be more appropriately titled "utilization research". It's far more than a head-counting section, although it does that essential task very well, and prolifically. Since April of this year they have delivered twenty-two (22) reports. Through the use of data from commercial ratings companies as well as in designing our own surveys for special audiences, such as in-school audiences to serve the spectrum of levels, we are kept informed on a quarterly basis of the utilization of specific programs. This is but a beginning. If the schools in one district do not have a utilization rate up to that of neighbouring districts, for example, our Audience Research section searches for explanations. We could be presenting the most excellent series ever produced, but the influence of principals and other senior administrators can have disastrous effects. This of course seems obvious, but we now have research documentation to support our intuitions, and it's very apparent that we have to devise alternative strategies for specific regions.

The third section, Project Research, is primarily concerned with formative research, and with the designing of follow-through summative evaluation on our major productions. We've been fortunate in securing the services of a researcher to head this section who happens to be an expert in eye-movement research (Dr. Ken O'Bryan), and who has had experience as a consultant with CTW. As you know, a large part of the problem is to establish rapport with producers, to convince them that the researcher's task is supportive. During the past year this section worked closely with producers on more than forty projects, completing this work on twenty while making a beginning on the others. Although a number of these projects are modest, and in many of them we were not involved sufficiently early to have optimum effect, nevertheless we've had a significant impact on the development of our programming. The best example of this is apparent in our new Readalong series for primary school children, a series which very quickly has far surpassed all of the other school programs we present on our network. In this series our researchers worked very closely with the producers and were able to give quick and effective feedback, often within a day or two of the request. Our approach, by the way, is to stress direct verbal feedback to the producer, not to worry about written reports as the series develops except as aide memoires for the use of the project team only, and not to publish any report until it has been seen by the producer. The success of decision-oriented research in the development of Readalong has done more in our agency to establish the value of formative research than any other amount of persuasion, however reasonable, could ever have done. (For a direct report on Readalong I am pleased to tell you that you may sample it by going to our OECA booth, at this Convention.)

We still have a way to go, but it's gratifying to know that we have made an effective beginning. I'm reminded of a story told by Ian MacDonald, President of York University, who is a member of our Board of Directors. The

story--a true story--is about an old professor friend of Ian's who lived on one of the Toronto islands:

"One morning he came running down to the dockside, knowing he was a little late, and saw the ferry about two feet off the dock. He threw his briefcase over the rail, and with an heroic leap he jumped over the rail and landed in a heap on the deck. As two deckhands picked him up and smoothed him out, he looked up at them sheepishly and said, "Well, I made it, eh?" And they said, "Yes sir. But why didn't you wait until we got into dock?"

There have been occasions, I confess, when I've felt a bit like the professor after he landed--not really knowing whether we were coming or going--but we did get on board, and we are now well on our way.

October, 1976